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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR RICE MEETS WITH BOTSWANA FOREIGN
MINISTER MERAHFE

Classified By: ECOSOC M/C Robert Hagen for reasons 1.5(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On May 14, Botswana FM Mompati Merafhe told Ambassador Rice that Botswana would balance support for Zimbabwean social ministries controlled by the MDC and revitalization of the economy with the necessity of continuing to deny access to foreign credit to ZANU-PF leaders. To this end, Botswana had launched bank credits for select Zimbabwean business firms, but would tightly monitor the program. He recommended that the USG support salary payments for teachers and the health sector, perhaps utilizing the SADC Finance Ministers working group that would monitor regional assistance to Zimbabwe. Merafhe stated he was "reasonably optimistic" about South Africa President Zuma's new cabinet. He praised PEPFAR's support for Botswana's public health program as well as AGOA-generated job creation and urged the Obama administration to generate new initiatives for which Botswana, an emerging country, might be eligible. END SUMMARY

¶2. (U) On May 14, Ambassador Rice met with Botswana Foreign Minister Mompati Merafhe who had come to New York to accept recognition of Botswana as "the best African country of the year" by the Celebrate Africa Foundation. Ambassador Rice praised Botswana's "steady leadership" in the region and commented that the new administration would seek to strengthen our bilateral relationship.

¶3. (C) In commenting on Zimbabwe, Merafhe noted the need to "strengthen the hands of change" while accepting that for now, President Mugabe would not disappear from the scene. Ambassador Rice stated that the USG was re-examining its Zimbabwe policies, noting the difficulty of balancing the need to avoid strengthening ZANU-PF hardliners while assisting the MDC to show that their party can bring about improvements to the life of ordinary Zimbabweans. Merafhe agreed, noting that Botswana was trying to assist MDC in improving the economic situation by providing a 500 million USD loan facility to selected private Zimbabwe business firms. He stated that the government would work with the SADC finance ministers working group to ensure that ZANU-PF hardliners would not have access to hard currency through this line of credit.

¶4. (C) Merafhe suggested that the United States might best support the MDC by providing assistance for education and health in Zimbabwe, including funds for enhancing teacher salaries. He thought the USG should consult the Zimbabwe Finance Minister, a MDC post, on ways to ensure that such funds could not be siphoned off by the ZANU-PF.

¶5. (C) FM Merafhe termed former South African President Mbeki, the "worst of the worst" and quipped that current President Zuma had to be an improvement. He said he was "reasonably optimistic" about Zuma's new cabinet, but that FM Mashabane was an unknown quantity.

16. (U) Merafhe urged the USG to continue the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), noting that PEPFAR financing had permitted Botswana to reach 117,000 out of 140,000 HIV-positive patients needing anti-virals. He said that initial indications suggested that Botswana's HIV incidence was beginning to fall with the biggest success lying in a 96% reduction of mother/infant transmission. Merafhe noted that Botswana had successfully launched a "cluster" program of providing health clinics to groups of villages and that follow-on steps would include placing more advanced medical technology into clinics as opposed to staffing and equipping large hospitals. Merafhe also urged the continuation of the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA) tariff provisions, noting that AGOA had created 10,000 new textile industry jobs in Botswana.

17. (U) Ambassador Rice commented that the Clinton administration had launched AGOA, the Bush administration PEPFAR, and the new administration was open to creative thinking on a new initiative in which Botswana might lead by assisting other African countries through the dissemination of good practice and know-how. The agricultural sector might be a fertile sector for a new initiative, FM Merathe agreed, noting that Botswana's recent expansion of agricultural inputs (seed and fertilizer) to small farmers had led to a record-setting bumper crop, expansion of land under cultivation, and a boost to food security. Ambassador Rice commented that assistance with renewable energy would be another area to explore assistance and joint programs.

Wolff